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# Feminist Scholarship Review: Traveling the World in Women's Shoes

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# **TRAVELING THE WORLD IN WOMEN'S SHOES**



**FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP REVIEW  
THE WOMEN'S CENTER  
TRINITY COLLEGE  
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## **Co-Editors**

**Kathryn Broad, '06 and Chelsea King, '06**

**Cover Photo: "Culture Parade"**

**Maggie Schott, '06**

## **FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP REVIEW**

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# **TRAVELING IN WOMEN'S SHOES**

## **Feminist Scholarship Review Introduction**

*The way we view ourselves is based on a variety of factors including age, sex, and nationality. The country that we are born in is a major factor in determining whom we become. Traveling can force us to examine our own identities and highlight the various cultural differences between women around the world. Each of the women who are published in this issue of the Feminist Scholarship Review has lived a unique experience abroad. Their essays do not claim to define the way in which women live in various countries, yet are a study of how women are viewed throughout the world. The reality of being a woman differs greatly from country to country. These contributions allow us a glimpse of women's treatment abroad. These snapshots of their lives are these women authors effort to share their experiences with us. For all those who have lived or traveled abroad, especially women, it is important to learn and consider how we are perceived across the globe, and why.*

**Editors: Kathryn Broad, '06 and Chelsea King, '06**

# **The Personal and the Political in India**

Meena Gopal, Women, Gender and Sexuality

It is opportune that I begin to write this piece at the intersections of Black History Month and the Women's History Month, during my visit to Trinity College, at Hartford this spring. It has put in perspective and raised a lot of issues around race, class, gender and socio-economic disparities in America, and I notice that the city of Hartford in particular is an example of this. It made me realize that, even as Bush visits India, things here are not very different from back home.

March is a heady time in India for women's activism; it is a time when women's organizations come together to demonstrate solidarity, but also reiterate the resistance that they pose against the state and patriarchal society. It is also the time to realize that many of the battles that were fought nearly 25 years ago need to be fought yet again along newer grounds. However, today, it is not just the state and society that needs to be confronted but the new god of the millennium - the market - that needs newer forms and methods of resistance. Drawing on certain markers of this quarter century history, I will try to foreground some of the current challenges facing the women's movements today.

Violence against women forms the common thread that links the struggles of the 1980s with those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 1979, the anguish of 4 lawyers over the Supreme Court absolving two policemen of the rape of the 14-year-old tribal girl compelled them to write an open letter. This letter then became a rallying point for several women's groups to take shape and form the current of the second wave of the women's movement in India. One such group was the Forum Against Oppression of Women, known popularly as the Forum with its location in an urban metropolitan milieu. Several hundred women have been part of the Forum, moved in and out of it, but it has continued to shape the radical strain of feminist politics in India today as well as inspire several women who have come to be associated with it. Along with other groups, it was part of the campaign to amend laws dealing with rape and sexual assault.

Even though the women's movement has addressed issues concerning women from a common platform, the voices of diversity within it have felt the need to seek a separate platform to address specific concerns. This could be taken to mean either a failing of the women's movement or an expansion of its diversity, seeking to represent itself in the plural as the women's movement(s) as well as to assert a standpoint. Dalit women have thus felt the need to organize separately and even celebrate another day to commemorate the struggles of women, who suffer oppression of not just multiple patriarchies but upper caste dominance across gender and class. Muslim women have felt the need to find secular spaces for legal redress, while maintaining their identities as citizens. Lesbian women have fought for a space within the women's movement asserting their feminist politics despite simmering homophobia, while organizing separately to decriminalize same-sex desire with other sexuality rights movements.

The late '80s and '90s saw the emergence of right wing politics - both religious and economic - with both the state and society coming down with a vengeance on



women. The overturning of a Supreme Court judgment granting maintenance to an indigent Muslim woman with a separate legislation protecting rights of divorce of Muslim women, and the buckling of the state to religious fundamentalist forces, gave ample opportunity for the consolidation of the Hindu Right. A subsequent instance of state ineptitude following the sati (widow immolation) of a young Rajput woman, where the Rajput (a Hindu dominant caste) community mobilized along political and religious identities, demonstrated the overarching challenge that right wing forces of all varieties posed to feminist politics. The carnage in 2002 against the Muslim communities in the state of Gujarat, where a Hindu right wing government was in power, was testimony to the genocide, with blatant state complicity, targeting women with utmost brutality and horror in the sexual violence inflicted on them. Efforts from the women's movements, human rights organizations and democratic forces, has set the stage for some justice to emerge, in the form of opening up of cases filed in the courts, or reopening of cases dismissed due to lack of evidence and having them transferred for retrial to fast-track courts in other states.

Today, however, there is a strange but significant coalescing of forces, including the political leaders, the police, educational authorities, upper class elite, indicating anxieties around sex and sexuality, once again writ on the bodies of women. Strangely this contradictory pull occurs at a time when India is emerging as a world power, with its human resource potential in information technology, its new and emerging markets and its location as a global investment site. It is also a regional power in South Asia with tremendous potential as an ally in global realpolitik. Within the country, of course, there are the anxieties evident in the moral policing of young people, whether it is around dress codes for students in colleges or street censorship and policing of love on Valentine's Day. Right-wing moralists attack youth who give each other gifts and vandalize shops that display and sell gifts and other articles for Valentine's Day.

Both right wing moralists and educational authorities enforce dress codes for women, preventing them from wearing trousers or sleeveless shirts for reasons of indecency! Police lathi charges young men and women sitting in benches in parks enforcing morality for young people, purging public places of indecency! A state government bans women (who have been earning a living thus for several years) from dancing in beer bars, as they corrupt the innocent youth who splurge money on liquor in these joints! Women and their sexuality are a soft target to camouflage larger forces that refuse be contained. In a country where homosexuality is still criminalized, the law becomes an easy tool for the police to indulge in gay bashing. Lesbian women's invisibility exists side by side with routine gay bashing that the police resort to on men who have access to public spaces.

In the city of Mumbai, one of the foremost financial centers of the world, signs are placed on the roads as the city corporation does road repair work, expanding and beautifying them: *Please bear with us today, for a better tomorrow*. Mumbai is being prepared for attracting foreign investment by periodic cleansing of the city of its migrants who live in shanty settlements; work in its burgeoning informal sector and contributing to almost 60 per cent of the city's economy. Their settlements are ruthlessly demolished and the residents asked to return to their villages, despite the manifestoes of the parties that

came to power bearing witness to promises of legalizing their settlements. Increasingly the state and the powers that be only respond to its middle and upper class citizens.

In spite of such challenges the people's, including the women's movements, have kept up their resistance: a right-wing government at the Centre is no more in power; justice is being slowly done to the survivors of the genocide in Gujarat, where women have been the prime witnesses; several development projects begun with assistance from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, are being resisted. It makes me wonder at the parallels between the world's largest democracy that is India and the world's oldest democracy that is the United States: things are not very different. Anxieties of race, religion, class and sexuality are institutionalized to a similar extent if not more here, than the anxieties of caste, religion, class and sexuality in India. A government here wages war externally against 'Islam' while remaining racist within, while a state and society there unleashes terror on minorities. The poor in both instances suffer a raw deal in a free and globalizing world.

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## After the Disco

By Lucy Ferris, Writer in Residence, Creative Writing Program

The air in the Austrian Alps was thin, as was I. Transported from the desert of southern California, I grew lightheaded as soon as I stepped off the Alpenbahn that had chugged its way up from Innsbruck to the hamlet of Gries am Brenner, where I was contracted to work as a waitress during the ski season.

Buoyed by one semester's high school German and romantic fantasy, I was running away. Five months earlier I had been informed by a trouble-making friend at college that a boy named Rod—a loner who had sat next to me in Nietzsche class and once asked me to cut his hair—had mentioned he was in love with me. Rod was studying in Vienna. I was chasing him. I had made it this far, a few kilometers from the famous pass into Italy. Except for the razor-sharp air and, soon enough, the enormous woman who welcomed me to the Hotel Grieserhof, my life made perfect sense.

Frau Hauser, my greeter and boss, could neither climb stairs nor bend her mammoth body into a straight chair. The single parent of two small children—I realize now how young she was—she ran the Grieserhof with military command. The day began at seven and was broken by two hours' rest in the afternoon, during which Fritz the cook, Herrmann the headwaiter, and the Yugoslav girls took naps. I wandered trails banked by shoulder-high snow and dreamt of Rod's coming to find me, to declare in the high white mountains his love for me. Then it was back to work, to serving soup and schnitzel and slivovitz to the skiers and the locals. Late in the afternoon the postmaster would come to the bar, lean over, and offer to show me how big he could get. After dinner the skiers stretched out in the lounge, smoked, ordered glühwein. Finally Frau Hauser would release us, all but the unhappy Herrmann, and we stumbled into the crisp air and slid down the road to the disco.

I was the only American in the village. At the disco—a basement room with a disc jockey, a bartender, and a postage-stamp dance floor—young workers clustered around the Yugoslavs and me. They asked if everything they had heard was true. This was 1973. Young people in America, my new friends informed me, all lived together without marrying. Drugs made the young Americans wild. Except for the wars—Vietnam and the war against the blacks—Americans had the life. Could I teach them soul dancing? Could I teach them line dancing? Did I want a cigarette?

Back at the hotel I greeted Herrmann, maybe helped him clean the bar. Awake in my attic room, my tiny skylight rich with stars, I felt the noble ache of my longing. So late, so filled with smoke and snow, my world seemed stretched to a sort of ether through which I might rise and float to what I called love.

Then the Italians started to cross the border.

Dishwashers and deliverymen, like my local acquaintances, they appeared once or twice in the bar during the afternoon lull. They ordered espresso. They smoked and stared. Herrmann, sweet and emphysemic, needed his sleep, so I did not seek his help. When Frau Hauser lumbered in and saw the postmaster and the Italians, I imagined she shot me a look of scorn: the tongue-tied Amerikanere at sea among the locals. "Wie



geht's!" she greeted the postmaster, and planted herself so he could not stretch his gaze around her bulk.

Soon enough, the Italians began frequenting the disco. Here they were outnumbered, but it was a spectator sport. They asked me to dance; the others pushed me onto the floor; they chuckled as the Italians ground their hips. All in good fun. Did I want a cigarette?

Finally one night, as a fresh snow fell, I told my pals at the disco that I was tired and would head back early. I felt, indeed, weary to the bone. Where, I had been asking myself, was Rod-who-was-in-love-with-me? How long must my trial go on? I made my way back up the hill, fat flakes landing on my lashes. Halfway there, from behind me, I heard the tongue clicks, the whistles. High-pitched little yelps, like coyotes. There were five of them—I'd seen only three, in the disco. As I quickened my step they drew closer from behind, then danced to the front. "Aiee, Lucy Lucy Lucy!" the one in front said. The rest was in Italian, but no mistaking the meaning of fingers to lips, hands to crotches. I began to weave, avoiding their bodies. One snatched my hat, then dangled it like a bullfighter's cape. The Grieserhof was before me, my key in my pocket, but what if they blocked the door, snatched the key, what if—

The rectangle of light opened onto the snow, a dark bulk at its center. "Gehen Sie weg," said Frau Hauser calmly. She was huge, omnipotent, a Valkyrie. "Ich will an die Polizei rufen," she said. Then, with her enormous arm, she beckoned me. The Italians flung my hat, then faded away, specters in the night.

Rod looked me up, eventually, but he was not in love with me—nor I, as it turned out, with him. My time at the Grieserhof turned out to be, not a means to an end, but the end itself. After that night, the Italians kept their distance. Frau Hauser spoke to me sometimes, after the postmaster had left in the afternoon. She considered me ignorant—I couldn't iron the cook's shirts, I had mistaken ideas about meat, I never made proper gluhwein—but she watched out for me. In that high-altitude, oxygen-deprived winter, that winter of loneliness and longing, she became my anchor. "Gehen Sie weg," she had commanded those who thought they had an easy mark. And then to me, as if our acquaintance, were of long and very different standing, "Kommst jetzt zu Hause, mein kluges Kind - come home now, my clever child.

# **“I Am Fighting the Battle Against Fatigue:” A Glimpse Into the Lives of Malian Women**

By Kathleen Milnamow, ‘06

As the airplane lands in Bamako during one of the first balmy evenings of the hot season, I realize my lack of preparation for the inherently unpredictable experience. How could I prepare to live with a Malian host family for 3 months, navigate the public transportation, eat the local foods, and speak the native tongue? I enter the world of black Africa. Would I be resented or revered with awe as a *toubab*, a white person? As a female, a Christian, and English-speaker, what is my role in this predominately Muslim, black, non-English speaking country? Naturally, I will fall short of describing and the cultural contexts that surrounded me, but I will attempt to provide a glimpse into the varied lives of Malian women.

Mali's cultural idiosyncrasies about gender roles, female independence, and women's rights reveal the multiple layers of meaning that envelop the dynamic lives of women in Mali. If you just look at the statistics, the outlook for many Malians, especially women, looks dismal. 69% of the country lives below the poverty line, mainly those in rural areas and mostly women.<sup>1</sup> On average, people are expected to live to age 49. A little over a third of girls are enrolled in primary school.<sup>2</sup> 92% of women aged 15-49 in Mali undergo female genital mutilation.<sup>3</sup> Life is not a breeze for many of the women and men I met, but there were moments of happiness and energy. After a day in the stifling heat, women gathered and celebrated in my neighborhood at exclusive all-female wedding party to dance for hours into the night.

Before I arrived with my host family, I began learning *Bambara*, one of Mali's several native languages. As I memorized simple salutations, their translations offered interesting context to better understand women's daily lives. In response to “good morning” in Bambara, a woman responds “Nse” (meaning “I am winning the fight against fatigue”), while a man responds “Mba” (“my mother protects me”). While the male responses seems to place women on a pedestal, the female response reminds Malians that respect and admiration, if any, is always dependent on other factors. Many women—both in the urban centers of Bamako and in isolated villages—bear primary responsible for raising the children, feeding the family and creating income by working in the fields, in co-ops, or small micro enterprises.

From an early age, girls are ingrained a sense of domestic obligation. During a week-long village stay I saw how young girls would come home during their hour-long break for lunch and instead of playing cards like their brothers, they would pound millet or collect water. The constant “thud...thud” woke me up at four in the morning. The girls were back to pounding millet. For me, they put on a smile and win the fight against fatigue. Men in Mali did work, but unemployment is widespread. If times got tough, men would always have their mothers to rely on and protect them: it is assumed that she will suffer the burden.

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<sup>1</sup> World Food Programme. 2002. Country Programme- Mali (2003-2007). Retrieved from [www.wfp.org/operations/current\\_operations/projects/docs/102050.pdf](http://www.wfp.org/operations/current_operations/projects/docs/102050.pdf) WFP/EB.3/2002/8/1

<sup>2</sup> World Food Programme. 2002. Country Programme- Mali (2003-2007).

<sup>3</sup> DHS conducted during the period 1996-2001 and MICS conducted during the period 1999-2001.

As an outsider, the burden seemed lighter and heavier at the same time. On International Women's Day in March 2005, hundreds of Malian women gathered in an auditorium to commemorate the occasion. Some women brought their children along. Most of the women wore matching ensembles in a special fabric created in honor of International Women's Day. However, one feminist scholar refused to wear the ensemble, contending that women should be more concerned with demanding equal rights and respect rather than worrying about what to wear. While the occasion gathered women and fostered visible solidarity, the Women's Day program also reinforced traditional gender roles in its bridal fashion show, cooking recipes suggestions, and free laundry detergent samples. My Malian academic director said that it would be ridiculous and embarrassing for him or any other male to attend such an occasion. If men weren't listening, then were women actually improving their dignity and opportunities or perpetuating the status quo?

Outside of the auditorium, younger generations of females experimented with different ideas about autonomy, sexuality, and their roles with their male counterparts. My four host sisters, ages 5 through 17, wanted to wear jeans and sing like Beyonce. On an old television, my sisters and mother absorbed the ever-growing influx of Western culture—from MTV to Spanish soap operas. My host sisters and mother simultaneously retained their cultural and religious beliefs. As devout Muslims, they prayed with a veil over their body five times. My host sisters also painted their nails and commented on the size of their chests.

Above all, I believe that this female solidarity—whether it arises during times of burden or bliss—is a fundamental part of empowerment. While some women seek solace amongst their girlfriends about issues their relationships and marriages, others are actively addressing issues female genital mutilation and equal rights in the political and social service arenas. More people, women *and* men, are talking about important issues. And all the while, women have each other.

# **Increasing Gender Equality in Chile: One Woman at a Time**

By Paloma Gutierrez, '06

As a Latin American Studies major who is familiar with the history, culture, politics, and economies of many Latin American countries, I have often noticed a lack of attention paid to famous females, as role models and mothers. To this day, in many parts of Latin America, the idea of "Machismo" (the male serving as a macho, dominant force in the family) is alive and well, with men serving in the majority of political and public roles. In addition to being left out of the public arena, many women are obligated to perform a "double day" workload, in which they either hold a job or perform duties outside the house, but also have to take care of the cooking, cleaning and childcare. This causes a void in which women are kept invisible by their "Machista" husband and their overwhelming duties around the house. However, these gender norms are changing, with the most obvious achievement being the election of Michelle Bachelet.

On January 15, 2006, Michelle Bachelet was the first woman elected as President of Chile. Even more impressively, not only did Bachelet rise to the position without the help of a more influential husband, she is a single mother with three children. While many might argue that Bachelet's victory over Sebastian Pinera has more class than gender implications, (She won more votes in the poorer regions of the country) it is hard to ignore the image of a woman leading a country. Bachelet has promised to be the president of all Chileans, women and men, and quickly took action in announcing that half of her cabinet members would be females, and tackling issues of unemployment in poor families and improving early childhood education.

While Chile has made significant strides in gender equality, as a foreigner living there, many issues are still visible. At the gym that I joined, the women never ventured to the free weight section, and I received more than a few looks for wearing shorts, as none of the other women did. On a broader scale, women are not given the same opportunities for education as men are, and then are forced to work in the informal sector of the economy, selling discounted clothing and goods on the street, for example. Also, as there is a strong influence of the Catholic Church in the country, woman often struggle to obtain adequate birth control and other health services. Yet, with Bachelet in office and the economy improving, woman can more than just hope to improve their quality of life, it is almost definite.



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